

*Children, Families, Health, and Human Services Interim Committee:*

Thank you for your efforts past, present and future to provide early care and education opportunities to Montana's youngest citizens. I am writing to inform you of the success in the community of Lolo this past school year.

Montana is home to many quality early education programs. The Department of Public Health and Human Services (DPHHS) currently certifies 200 STARS programs. Thirty-five additional programs are currently earning their way to stars credentials. The Best Beginnings STARS to Quality Program is a voluntary quality rating and improvement system that aligns quality indicators with support and incentives for early childhood programs and early childhood professionals. STARS programs are continuously improving their ability to provide a healthy, safe, and enriching environment for children.

Quality programs are less of an issue thanks to the "MT STARS to Quality" program. However, the availability and cost of quality to both families and programs is the real challenge. Small communities in Montana tend to suffer the most.

Governor Bullock initiated funding for the *STARS Preschool Grant Program* in the summer of 2017 and the Montana Legislature made funds available to expand or create new early education programs across the state. *Lolo Preschool & Childcare* applied for funds to expand services in the community. Lolo Preschool & Childcare has been providing quality early care and education since 1980, becoming nationally accredited (NAEYC) in 2005 and a STAR 4 program in 2017. At the same time, *Lolo Public School* applied for funds to create the first preschool classroom in District #7. Both programs received a call from DPHHS to ask if they were willing to work together to create the first public-private partnership in the state. LEAP, (*Lolo, Early, Academic, Program*) was created. This partnership nearly doubled the opportunities for preschool children in Lolo.

The governor's team has endured a long struggle with those who do not understand the benefits of early childhood. Cooperation between public and private early care and education providers requires an extreme level of commitment and compromise. Private care providers in both homes and childcare centers in Montana have raised concerns over the potential loss of clientele as public preschools are created in communities. Lolo Preschool & Childcare's governing board has encouraged the director, Gina Morton and staff to assist Lolo School District in serving families with young children in the community. There has been no evidence of loss of clientele in private care in Lolo. The goal of providing expanded care to local students who have the greatest academic, social/emotional, and/or financial need is being realized.

School District #7 superintendent Dale Olinger, and elementary principal Shawna Keintz have welcomed mentoring from the experienced personnel at Lolo Preschool & Childcare. Experienced mentors have provided assistance with curriculum selection and implementation and sharing best practices student assessments between the two organizations. Lolo Preschool & Childcare provided wrap around care before and after the program when families requested.

Sharon DiBrito, Assistant Director, Lolo Preschool & Childcare